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N.S. Links Gives Students Networking Tools

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By Nova Scotia Links staff

The next time Wendi Gosse goes to a business function, she'll be armed --armed with business cards, pockets and some fresh networking knowledge.

Her name-tag will be stuck on the proper side -- the right -- and she'll know just how to shake that hand -- firmly, with confidence. And her palm will be dry, thanks to the tissue she's tucked into her jacket pocket.

Ms. Gosse, a 20-year-old commerce student at Dalhousie University, learned these "networking" hints from Melodie Stewart during a recent Nova Scotia Links professional development session.

Ms. Stewart is president of Pro-Net, an innovative Halifax-based company that provides networking support to businesses. Most of the time, she's doling out advice to lawyers, bankers and accountants. But on a recent day, Ms. Stewart had the attention of more than a dozen NS Links interns in a Nova Scotia Community College classroom.

NS Links is a provincial government initiative that provides career-related work placements to post-secondary students. One aspect of the program is mandatory professional development sessions on a range of topics, including entrepreneurship, financial planning, and The Art of Effective Networking, as Ms. Stewart calls her lively interactive session.

What seems so straightforward -- so common sense -- can elude many of us, said Ms. Stewart. Networking may be the buzzword of the '90s, but she said it's about much more than passing out business cards at a function. It's about promoting yourself professionally as a business by finding "common ground with other human beings," she told the group of students.

And starting young is important if you want to that competitive edge, she said. "You need professional contacts in place before you graduate. Otherwise, you're competing with other students in a city with five universities."

Ms. Stewart encouraged the group of 20-something students to join community and business associations, to get out and meet people by attending networking events, "even if it scares the life out of you."

"The first networking function I attended I was scared silly. I was glued to the side of the woman I came with, and when we went in, she told me: OK, I'll go this way, and you go over there.' I was terrified. But I survived it.

"Many people who go to networking functions only have one goal: what time can I leave? That should not be your goal. You'll learn to overcome your shyness, but that comes with experience."

Ms. Stewart made no promises, but she said networking can provide results, in some cases, overnight.

"I was at a trade show once and these two young women, 26 and 24, passed me by without stopping. I approached them and asked them why they just walked by? They said, 'We don't graduate for another four months.' I challenged them to come along to a function I was attending the next evening, and that night they both got jobs. One is working in the States making $40,000 US a year and the other is working for a prestigious insurance firm."

Wendi Gosse isn't banking on that kind of immediate success, but she plans to put some of the networking ideas into practice soon.

"I do plan on attending some networking events. She (Ms. Stewart) made me think of things right now, not two years later when I graduate. She put things into perspective. It's not too early to look for work."

Another student participant, Kunal Adhikari, agreed. He's working on an engineering degree at DalTech while spending a work term at Halifax electronics firm. Mr. Adhikari plans to put his networking theory into practice immediately with his music, an interest he hopes to develop into something more permanent.

"This information is relevant and eye-opening. It inspired me to get myself started. I've thought about these things before, but this has really given me the impetus to put some of these ideas into action."

NS Links has helped provide close to 2,000 Nova Scotia students with work experience since the program began in 1994, and will do the same for more than 1,000 students in the approaching May-to-September term by offering private sector-employers a 40 per cent wage subsidy.

The program is a partnership involving the Department of Education and Culture, Human Resources Development Canada and Economic Development and Tourism. Deadline for employer applications is Feb. 28, 1998. Contact NS Links at 902-424-2625 or 1-888-466-3111 for more information.

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NOTE TO EDITORS: A photo of Melodie Stewart and students, accompanied by a copy of this feature, was mailed to media outlets Friday, Feb. 6.

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